

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

LAOTIAN SECRET WAR EXHIBIT

INFORMANT: MONK JOHN LANG SYHACHAEK

INTERVIEWER: SARAH MORRISON

TRANSLATOR: PINKHAM BOUASRI

DATE: JANUARY 21, 2008

S = SARAH

T = TRANSLATOR

Tape 08.09

Note: “T” will be used to denote Translator’s voice, translating the questions asked of and the responses from the informant.

Prelude: Often times throughout the interview informant and translator are speaking at the same time making it difficult to comprehend. Sometimes when interviewer is speaking, informant speaks at the same time, again making it difficult to comprehend. Please note the word “Unclear” will mark those times when a word or comment cannot be transcribed.

S: All right. This is the interview of, what’s his name again?

T: Ajahn Lang. [Ajahn is the Laotian word for Monk]

S: Lang, right, on January 21.

T: John Lang Syhachaek. His first name is John.

S: John? Okay, on January 21, 2008. Sarah Morrison along with (T: Pinkham Bouasri) doing translation. Okay, where and when were you born?

T: He was born in Laos in [Bonsimano? Tasansimano].

S: The town?

T: The town, yes. In 1933. Friday, February 1, 1933.

S: Okay. All right. Did he move around, or did he stay in that area?

T: Stayed there all of the time.

S: All the time?

T: Started school in 1948.

S: Okay.

T: Graduated in 1950.

S: Now was that a school for kids that everyone went to, or was it a school to be a monk?

T: No, just for regular people, not for the monk.

S: Just for a couple of years then?

T: Yah.

S: Okay. What did his parents do for work?

T: After school he became a monk for four years.

S: Okay.

T: After he graduated from school he got married and then he went to work with the people in the city. (S: Okay) He worked with the people in the city.

S: What did he do?

T: 1955. (S: Okay) He worked in a rice field.

S: Umhm, okay. What about his parents? What did they do? Were they farmers, or?

T: They were in the rice field.

S: Did he help out when he was younger?

T: He helped his parents since he was thirteen years old.

S: Okay. And what were his parents' names?

T: The name of the father is [name unclear]. The mother's name is Mari.

S: Mari? Okay.

T: The same last name, Syhachaek.

S: And what are his grandparents' names? Does he remember?

T: They all passed away now.

S: His grandparents, and parents and everyone?

T: Yes. Since the communists came into Laos and then they have to work for that, you know the new regime Government. He wants to escape from Laos, but he couldn't. So he has to figure a way to get out of Laos.

S: Can he talk more about that, why he wanted to escape?

T: When he worked for the new regime, so they're only allowed to eat one time a day.

S: Now the new regime, is that under the communists?

T: Yes.

S: Okay. So when they came in he had to abide by their rules then.

T: Yes. Yah, he escaped in 1979 to Thailand, and then he stayed in the camp in Thailand. He stayed in the camp for nine months. And then after that they had an interview, which country that you want to go to, the third country. So he decided to come to America.

S: And why did he decide that?

T: Because the French, half of France is communist already. So he didn't, doesn't want to go. Because the Americans trying to help people to fight the communist and they lost. So he has to come to America.

S: Umhm. Okay. I need to back up a little bit, (T: Okay) if that's okay. If he can talk (--) We were talking about when he was a kid, and his childhood and everything. If he can talk more about why he became a monk, and his studying, and you know, he said I think it was four years? But if he can just talk a bit about why he went from working the rice fields to, and he went to school (--)

T: Well he became a monk for four years when he was young. And then he (--)

S: Then he got married right?

T: Then he got married and he become the normal person first, and he got married [unclear], and then he got married.

S: Can he talk about why he was a monk though, and his experience?

T: Because my mom wanted me to be a monk, because you know at that time the French Revolution, they recruit the soldiers. So to avoid becoming a soldier they have to become a monk.

S: Oh, okay. So that's why he went to do that?

T: Yes.

S: Okay. And then what happened after that?

T: Then after four years he became a [unclear] and then got married. After he got married he worked in the rice field.

S: Umhm. And what town did he live in?

T: [Bonsimano].

S: Same place?

T: Same place. That's where he was born.

S: And what year was that?

T: 1955, that's the year he got married.

S: Okay. And how long did he stay there for with his wife?

T: Twenty-five years live with his wife.

S: Okay.

T: Until the communists came, and then he has to work for the new government.

S: Okay. Can he talk more about that in like more detail, about what he had to do, and what it was, life was like at that time with the new regime?

T: So they had to recruit people in the village to go work. [Unclear] we only eat one time a day.

S: For everyone?

T: For everyone, everybody. Everybody has to go. If you don't, and if the person doesn't want to go they had to go to the retention camp.

S: And where was that?

T: Phongsali. They had to go to the north area of Laos. He's not sure which state, Phongsali or Sainyabuli.

S: Phongsali sounds familiar. I think it was that, unless there were two areas. So what happened if you would end up there? Did he know what happened if you were taken and he wouldn't cooperate?

T: They're going to capture you.

S: Umhm. Would they hurt you? Would they torture you?

T: Yes. They put you in jail, like an underground jail. (S: Umhm) It's not normal. You can't even talk back, they'd shoot you.

S: Wow. So he conformed and he did what he had to do to survive?

T: Yes, I do everything they told of me to do. I even have to run, you know.

S: Run, run away, or run just to run?

T: No, run if they told you to run, to do things.

S: Oh okay, you're being dictated what to do. Now did he belong to a political party at this time?

T: No, he doesn't go in. He doesn't belong to any political party. And since he came, he arrived in San Francisco, and he went to school over there for one year and he couldn't find work over there. And then he moved to Dallas, Texas. This was in 1982. (S: Umhm) He arrived in America on May 13, 1980. He arrived in San Francisco. And then he lived with his sponsor in Oakland. (S: Okay) The name of that sponsor is Linda.

S: Okay. Does he know the last name?

T: He doesn't remember. He doesn't know their last name?

S: How was she, was she like a charity, like Catholic, or Christian sponsoring him?

T: IRC, that's the name of the organization.

S: Oh, okay.

T: IRC that sponsor people.

S: Okay. So it wasn't a family member who helped him out. It was someone entirely (--)

T: No, it's not a family member.

S: Now did have children at this time with his wife when they came over here, or was it just he and his wife?

T: He left his wife in a town in Laos. He left alone because he doesn't know the language, he doesn't know anything. He just came by himself.

S: So his wife is still over there?

T: She passed away.

S: Oh wow.

T: Only children connected, two girls.

S: When did she pass away?

T: 1988 she passed away.

S: Now why did he want to leave again, to come from (--) He went from Laos to Thailand, and then from Thailand to here. Why did he want to come to America again?

T: Because you know the guy that interviewed him, John Walker interviewed him, and he asked him, "Where do you want to go? To French, or to America?" So he has to think about it. He then decided to come to America.

S: So he only gave him two options?

T: He only said two. [Repeats] He only has two.

S: Really. And so he made it out. Wow.

T: When I lived in Thailand they were very hard on the people living in the camp, because he can't even get out of camp, because they have everything. People get out of camp and the people are yelling at them.

S: Now how long was he there in Thailand?

T: Nine months.

S: Nine months. And was that with his family, or just him?

T: Only him. He has to leave Laos alone because he has problem with the family, and because his wife went to tell the leader in the village about him. And so he has to escape from Laos, otherwise he's going to be captured.

S: What did his wife say?

T: At that time he was planning to take his family away from Laos, but his wife didn't trust him. So she went to tell the leader, and then he, his wife betrayed him. So that's why he just run away himself. (S: Took off) Took off by himself.

S: Now how many kids did they have at that point?

T: Two.

S: Just the two, the girls?

T: At that time his children, the oldest one is twenty-five, and the youngest one is nine.

S: At that time?

T: At that time.

S: And is that all he's got right now? Is that the only children he had was those two?

T: Yes, only two.

S: Okay. That's what I thought. Okay. I don't think (--) Did he say when he met his wife, and where he met her?

T: They live in the same village.

S: Okay. And what year did they meet? Does he remember?

T: Because the parents (S: Oh they knew each other) knew each other, and then like arranged marriage.

S: Was it arranged?

T: Yes, the parents.

S: Okay. I'm going to have to go back again though, because he's talking about United States, but I still haven't really finished with what happened in Vietnam. If he could talk

about what life was like before the Vietnam War, and the Secret War happened? And then talk about how it changed and what life was like after?

T: At that time when they have order from the, you know, people, the leader in the village, and then they have to go talk to people in the village and let them know that there's war, the Vietnamese and then Laos, they're having a war. And at the time he was like a representative for that village. And then when he, they told him to go with like you know, get some food for the soldiers. So he has to go to people house.

S: For the communist soldiers?

T: For the Laos people, I mean Laos soldiers. The Laos soldiers because they go you know, in the war and they don't have food. Stuff like that. And people were not in the village, they had to bring them food. So they get it from the people in the village.

S: Okay. So they gave him that job to do to get the food together.

T: Yes.

S: What year was that?

T: There's one group with Souphanouvang, that work with the Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese people, I mean soldiers. And then they're fighting nonstop. Then American people fight too, in 1956 and 57. And then they were fighting back and forth until it close to [unclear]. Until 1975, and then the French called the Americans back and then [unclear] Vietnamese soldiers fighting each other.

S: In Laos?

T: Oh, at the border, because the Laos, between the border of North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

S: Right. Okay, that makes more sense.

T: Like close to the, toward the ocean, the Vietnam. And there's no place to go. They only let you escape, and they escaped, had to go to Thailand.

S: Does he remember any specific attack, or battles, or anything?

T: Laos soldier went to fight with the help of American soldiers. Now they're fighting Vietnamese soldiers. There's a south part within the war. They were fighting to go into (-) They were heading toward Cambodia at the time.

S: Okay. And when was that?

T: At that time it was 1968.

S: Okay. But he was never involved in anything where he was hurt, or?

T: Oh, he was not involved in the fighting and he was not a soldier. He was just the representative and you know, to give the food for the soldiers. And then he only, when the leader, you know, in that village or the state gave him the report, you know, where was the war, how many people got killed or hurt, so he has to go tell the people at the village.

S: Oh, okay. Was this for, he was working, he says the Laos soldiers. Was that the Loyalist section? Because it wasn't communist right, it was the Laos soldiers. So were they the Loyalist soldiers?

T: The Laos soldier is not a communist.

S: It's not. Was it neutral?

T: Yeah, it's the neutral.

S: The neutral section. Okay.

T: When they fight most of the soldiers that were dead were the Vietnamese soldiers.

S: Okay. Let's see. Can he talk about how the war affected him though? Like how it changed his life?

T: Since 1945 there was a war, French become fighting. (S: Right) And then from 1945 to 1947 (S: Japanese) Japanese, yah. Japanese came to Laos like in May, around that time and they were bombing. And then the French soldiers took Japanese soldiers and then go hiding in the mountain. And there's another group, another soldiers called [Isulat]. It's Laos people, but they have another group called that name.

S: Okay. Were they the neutral group, or what?

T: There's this guy's name called [Situm Kumandan], that's his groups' name is [Isulat], and he formed his own soldiers. And they make their own money.

S: They make their own money?

T: They make their own money and then give it to people to spend. After that, that's a new government, new leader. After that the French people went back to fight in 1967, and fighting with Vietnamese [unclear]. Fighting the Vietnamese. Oh, the Vietnamese soldiers dig up like a tunnel trying to get to the French soldiers.

S: Oh okay.

T: The Chinese soldiers told the Vietnamese to dig the hole. Sort of like the canal going into (--) (S: Yah) Then the French soldiers die a lot, and that's why they stop doing that.

And then they [start a] war and then a lot of Laos people to you know, to take care of themselves. And then in 1956 and the American went. At that time it was Johnson.

S: Umhm, the president.

T: Was the president.

S: Lyndon Johnson.

T: And then they were fighting, and he doesn't know who was fighting who. Americans went to help [unclear]. They could bring the gun stuff to try to help Laos. And they were fighting, and then the North Vietnamese go the help the South Vietnamese soldiers. And then American soldiers went to help the Vietnamese. Before the French help the South Vietnamese. When the French took off and then the Americans (S: Took over?) took over.

S: [Comment unclear].

T: Americans went to help Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

S: Okay.

T: That's why all three countries went to escape to America.

S: So in the 60s and 70s when Vietnam was going on and the whole Secret War happened though, and the American were dropping the bombs in Laos to chase out the communists, did they know that the Americans were dropping their bombs in Laos?

T: Yes we know, because they had their base in Thailand. They had their base in Thailand and they go to bomb in Laos. Yah, in 1960 they were heavily bombing in the south part of Laos.

S: Umhm. And how did they feel about that?

T: He thought that at the time Laos was looking at all of the Vietnamese soldiers was going to you know, completely wipe out because they were bombing all the time, like you know, all day. And then the soldiers were hiding you know, in the trees, in the mountains at that time.

S: Did he say the Vietnamese were going to be wiped out? Is that what he meant, or the Laos?

T: Yah, they were like Vietnamese soldiers that were over there, but they're not you know, like got killed. They didn't get killed over there. Yah, he didn't think that there were going to be any survivor, but there was in the North and in the South. And the same thing in the South, they were bombing in the '67. And Americans paid Thai people to go help.

S: They did?

T: During the '67 the '68 Thai went to help Laos. They didn't win the war. So they didn't win the war, and then the Vietnamese soldier took over that area they were having a fight. And then the Americans order our people to pack up. So [S: to leave] to leave, but Laos kept fighting. They were fighting until 1975. They told Laos that the war is over, keep out your weapons, and then put away your weapons.

S: The Americans said that, or?

T: Yah.

S: Yah.

T: And then they were capturing people, all of the soldiers, and then go put them in the camp in [unclear].

S: The Americans did that?

T: The leader Souphanouvang ordered them to stop the war.

S: Stop fighting with Vietnam?

T: Because they know that Americans are going to stop the war and they're going to back up. So that's why they stopped the war.

S: Okay, with Vietnam, right?

T: Yes.

S: Now what, before I forget, where was his village? Where was he in relation to where most of the battles were going on and the border?

T: It's far away, like a state. And this is sort of like fighting in the [unclear]. He only heard you know, the plane and the bomb, you know, the fighting.

S: He heard it. He didn't have to see it. He didn't really see it, or experience it.

T: He didn't see it. He only hear. He only saw the soldiers went to the war, and he know how heavy it is. And he doesn't know (--) When sometimes you know, when the soldiers were starving, something like that.

S: Now is he concerned at all for people's safety back in Laos since the, you know how some of the bombs are still there but they haven't detonated yet? So the kids pick them up and they get hurt or die.

T: He doesn't know, and he thought that they already detonated already.

S: He thought so? (T: Yes) He didn't realize that they're still (--)

T: No he doesn't know. People said they already detonated. They took the people (--) He said that they took the prisoner in Laos, they went to pick the bombs.

S: Oh wow.

T: During like 1975 they went to do that. They you know, they took the prisoner and go find the bombs.

S: Okay. Is there anything else he wants people to know about what happened over there? Any final thoughts about, about that time?

T: Yes there are. Last year I went to Laos and then I saw that you know, the government [unclear] a lot of Vietnamese people go into country and then they like (--) And then they were like, they torture, not really torture, they were [unclear] on the Laos people over there. And if they see people in [unclear], they can order them to go kill the people.

S: And this is the Vietnamese?

T: Vietnamese.

S: They're like telling them [unclear].

T: He said when he went to Laos that people told him that before they're going to go to the camp. There were like half the Vietnamese people train to be, specialize in taking over the country. And then the Vietnamese people most of the time, most of them took over Laos now, and then they learned the language.

S: Recently? This past few years?

T: All before the war they went to learn.

S: Oh, they started infiltrating at that point. They went in and started learning your language?

T: Yah, there were like 20,000 people. They were [learning] Laos, and they were [writing] in Laos. And after the war they used the people to work in Laos. After the war, about two weeks, they took the guy, the big leader in Laos, [Situm Kumandan]. That's the guy that formed his own group. And after the war, for two weeks and then they kill him, they murder him.

S: So this was after the Vietnam War ended, they were [unclear]?

T: Because at the time he told them he doesn't like French to take over Laos. So he formed his group to fight (S: The French?) the French, to get the French out of the country, out of Laos.

S: Okay. But then the Vietnamese, the whole war and everything, and they came in after the Americans left, and that's when they took him and they killed him?

T: Oh, because there's another guy that's Souphanouvang, he married to the Vietnamese, he [unclear] Vietnamese people. So, and then he recruit Vietnamese people. And then when they had the war like American people to go help Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, like they provide clothes and the weapons.

S: During the Vietnam War?

T: Yes, in the war. And then they didn't win the war. So American back up and then they have to surrender with all three countries, and then the communist took over.

S: And how did life change when the communist took over again?

T: After the war they were hassling people. They were taxed on everything. All of the properties that they had were taxed and everything, like even the animals too.

S: Really?

T: Yes.

S: Every single thing.

T: Every single thing that they have. Like the cows, land, they had a tax on everything like twice a year.

S: Oh my God! So they came in and just took over entirely, all of Laos?

T: Yes. And there were no jobs, only to raise animals. Raise chicken and [duck].

S: Now what was he doing at this time? Was he still farming?

T: He was a leader to go to take people to work.

S: Okay. Now how did he get chosen to be the leader?

T: Oh, because he used to work with people in the leader?

S: For the [unclear]?

T: Because he used to do that job before with the leader in the city. That's why he was chosen.

S: Was he well respected in his village, in his community? Looked up to?

T: Yes, there were like three or four village that known him well.

S: Okay, so that was all up to like '75 he said he was there, and then everything kind of fell apart?

T: Oh he worked with the people in the village from '75 to '79, that's four years.

S: Okay, and then he went to Thailand?

T: Yah, he went to Thailand in 1979.

S: Okay, and then he was there for nine months. And then he came here.

T: Yah, he was there for nine months. And then [unclear] took him to America. And they told him that he's going get to San Francisco. And then when he arrived to the airport, and then a sponsor went to pick him up over there at the airport. The lady [unclear]. And the lady called his name. And he had to carry the bag that had his name and you know, all the documents in the bag. At that time she only communicated with him, like use the sign language [Laughs]. (S: Oh right) Tell him what to do, and you know, go put things in the car, just pointing the way. She was (--)

S: Because she spoke English and he spoke Laos. Okay.

T: Yah. No, she didn't speak Laos. And she took him to a place, like you know, like the office, and had Laos people that worked there. [Laughing] And then he was glad to see the Laos people that speak Laos to him at that time. It was exciting.

S: He felt much better.

T: Because I don't know the language, so don't leave me with them. They said, "Don't worry."

S: Did he work with them? Did he work there? You said it was like an office or something.

T: Yah, it was in an office that Laos people were working in that office.

S: Did he (--) So he worked with them?

T: No, no, no. At that time when he just came, just arrived.

S: Oh okay. She just wanted to, with his own.

T: You know, took him over there and then (--) And then she took him to the office to give him money, a check. Like \$45.00 check. And then they went to cash the check. And that they, everybody, they went to cash the checks. And then he didn't know that this was dollars, the \$45.00 dollars.

S: He didn't know how much it was worth?

T: Yah, he didn't know how much it was worth.

S: So he didn't know if it was [unclear].

T: After he arrived from the airport, the lady went to pick him up from the airport and she brought him to this office, gave him the check. He went to get the check and then they placed him to live in with like five Laotian people.

S: Okay. He didn't live with her. He lived with (--)

T: And then in the morning everybody goes to school, and only me stay home.

S: And how old was he?

T: And later that day, after one guy came from school, and then he asked him to go to the Social Security to get the Social Security card, and to apply for the green card. And they went to apply for food stamps. At that time he got \$60.00 in food stamps. (S: Wow) And they give him cash. They got like twice a month, every fifteen days.

S: For food?

T: \$120.00. \$120.00 for fifteen days.

S: Oh wow! How old was he at this point?

T: At that time he was forty-five years old.

S: Now how long did he stay in California for before he went to what, Dallas I think?

T: About two years living over there. From '80 to '82, and then he moved. And at the time the assassin (--) You know, Reagan assassination? (S: Oh yah) He still lived there. He called his nephew in Dallas because he was looking for work, and then he told him to move to Dallas if he wants some work.

S: Oh, okay.

T: Yah, he moved to Dallas in 1982. He went to work in like white guys to be cleaning the office. He paid three dollars an hour. He works there for a month. Work until 9:00 p.m. After he found out that the white guy that he worked for, he had a contract to clean only one room for \$500.00. So he knew that this guy cheated. So then he went to work with somebody else that would pay him better, like \$4.75 for an hour.

S: Now how did he end up in Lowell after all of this [unclear] to America?

T: There were like a Laos organization in Dallas. They offer teaching English over there. So he worked and go to school at the same time during that time. So he worked from 4:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. And then he goes to school from 9:00 – 12:00 (S: Wow) during the day. He went to study for about six months.

S: Studying to learn English?

T: Yes. It was about thirty people in the school and he was the first one that past the GED.

S: Oh wow!

T: So they refer him to go to the college, but it was in nighttime. So he couldn't go.

S: Because he had to work?

T: He has to work.

S: So he knew how to speak English somewhat. So then what did he do from there? Where did he go?

T: He works over there. He worked at the hotel. And he done it for \$4.75. (S: Umhm) He works at the Marriot Hotel (S: Oh yes) for five years.

S: What did he do?

T: After that he went to work for the company that make [unclear]. It pays \$6.00 an hour.

S: So he got a raise?

T: [Chuckles] He was a janitor. He quit the job at the Marriot Hotel. So he went to work with this company. They got paid more as a janitor.

S: Now when did he come here?

T: Oh, he worked there for six years in Dallas. There's a guy live in Lowell that used to live in the same village with him in Laos (S: Oh really) called him in Dallas.

S: Really? Okay.

T: Come over here, don't stay over there. He moved from Dallas in 1987. (S: Okay) Okay, when he moved over here about a month, and then he went to apply for a job. And they have Laos people to help to look for the job. When he went to see this guy, his name is Phouma, and he helped Laos people to find a job in that area, in Lowell.

S: When he first (--) Oh, go ahead.

T: And then he told him that he has to go see another lady named Kathy. So he has to fill out a form, and they test him a little bit to see how, (S: the skills are) his skills are. And then he got a job. There's a company on Rogers Street, Bradford Industry, they were hiring janitor at the time. He went to apply for the job in May 16, and they were hiring him at that time. They would advertise for the job in a newspaper.

S: Now when he first came, did he live with the friend that called him?

T: No, he didn't live with that person. He lived with another couple, and family. (S: Okay) And he works for awhile and he saved money, and then he moved out to rent his own apartment with the roommate.

S: Okay. Now how did he end up here being a monk again?

T: After he works for this company in Lowell for thirteen years, and then he retired. After he reached the age of sixty-six he retired, and then he was thinking that he doesn't want to stay home. So he want to do something good. That's why he become a monk.

S: Okay. Did he have to do anything special to become a monk again, or because he had already been one when he was younger so he just (--)

T: He just become a new monk.

S: Okay. So he just (--)

T: He became around May 20th. He became a monk on May 20th, 2000.

S: So he's been here for eight years. And he's been here the whole time?

T: Yes, right here. He contributed a lot of money to building stuff, the buildings over here. He feels that he's getting old and then he doesn't start another family. So he rather become a monk and then serve the community.

S: Does he have any final thoughts, anything he wants to say?

T: No, he doesn't have anything to say. That's all. And he doesn't want to go back to Laos, but if he doesn't, if the American people doesn't want him to live here, he'd rather go live in Puerto Rico, because he like the land over there, [All laugh] the weather over there.

S: [Unclear]

T: [Laughing] He said he saw the news that the people from Puerto Rico, they came here, they went to school, become a pirate, pilot, I mean pilot, (S: Pirate [laughs]) yah, and then he went to fighting in Kuwait. And then he feel like you know, things not stable. Sometime you know things might change. (S: Right) And then you know.

S: That's true.

Interview ends